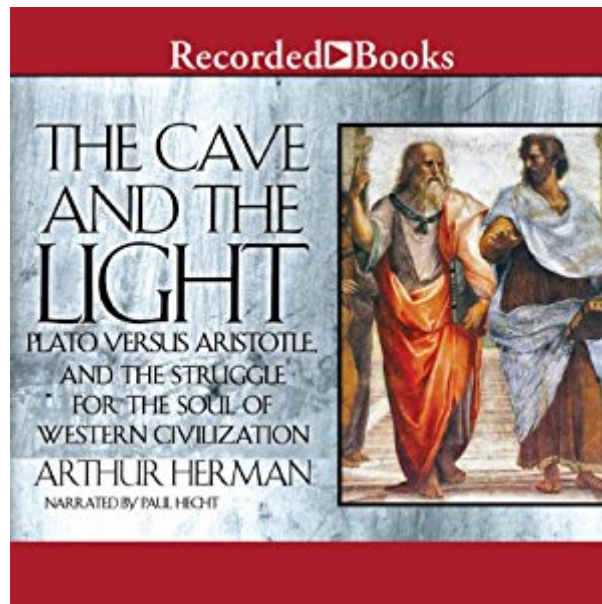


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The Cave And The Light: Plato Versus Aristotle, And The Struggle For The Soul Of Western Civilization



Synopsis

The Cave and the Light reveals how two Greek philosophers became the twin fountainheads of Western culture, and how their rivalry gave Western civilization its unique dynamism down to the present.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In this comprehensive view of the last 2,500 years, Arthur Herman sets out to prove his contention that the history of Western civilisation has been influenced and affected through the centuries by the tension between the worldviews of the two greatest of the Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. And for this reader at least, his argument is a convincing one. The book covers so much in terms of both philosophy and history that a full review would run to thousands of words. Happily that's not going to happen here, dear reader. I will simply say that, from knowing virtually nothing about philosophy, I now feel as well informed as if I had done an undergraduate level course in the subject. Herman starts way back at Socrates and brings us right up to the philosophers of the late twentieth century. He begins by giving a fairly in-depth analysis of the chief insights of both Plato and his former pupil Aristotle, using Plato's metaphor of the cave and the light to show how their views diverged. He shows Plato as the mystic and idealist, believer in the divinity of Pythagorean geometry, advocate of the philosopher king, believing that the route to the light of wisdom is available only to some through contemplation and speculation and that these few should set rules for the rest to follow. Aristotle is shown as the man of science and common sense, believing that

there is much to be learned from an examination of life in the cave itself and advocating that all men (sorry, women, you'll have to wait a couple of millennia) should be involved in government with the family at the heart of society.

I regret having to provide a negative review for a book that takes the Ancients seriously, but I do feel some responsibility to put forward a more critical opinion in order to counterbalance the general praise Herman's book has received so far, both in this review section and in the media at large. Herman proceeds from a delicious but ultimately fraught grand thesis: Plato the idealist and Aristotle the realist have determined the structure of Western Civilization through their diametrically opposed philosophical inquiries. In staking this position, Herman has adopted a rather standard interpretation of the relationship between the two great Greeks in their metaphysical and epistemological studies. Plato, so the story goes, believed in mysterious entities called Forms (Eidos) available only to the intellect and whose presence provides the foundation for all material beings. Aristotle, so the story continues, eschewed the Forms for an empiricism that begins with particular material beings as the most real beings and then proceeds toward generalizations, not unlike the inductive method scientists employ today and whose methodological validity can be traced all the way back to Aristotle himself. From reading Herman, you would not gather that this strict demarcation between the two philosophers is at best a contentious claim and at worst an outright deception. The last paragraph of Roger Kimball's review in the Wall Street Journal points toward this problem with "The Cave and the Light," but fails to stress just how large a problem it really is. Kimball quotes Book VII of The Republic, a worthy selection, and comments that "Plato isn't the thoroughgoing Platonist he is sometimes taken to be." Right.

At first blush the idea that there has been no original thought since the Greeks appears laughable. But the reality of it is not as easy to dismiss as it first seems. With his **THE CAVE AND THE LIGHT: PLATO VERSUS ARISTOTLE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR THE SOUL OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION** Arthur Herman reminds us that, as outlandish as that statement may appear, it's more accurate than most of us imagine. First, this book is a popular overview of Western thought from Socrates to the present. It is not intended to be a scholarly work and should not, as several reviews on this page have done, be judged by that criteria. If a scholarly overview of Western Philosophy is what you are after I would recommend *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas that Have Shaped Our World View* by Richard Tarnas. For those new to the subject or looking to refresh and update your understanding of Western Philosophy, this book is as

good as any and better than most. Accordingly those familiar with Western thought and philosophy will most likely not find a lot of new information in this book. But even those readers may find it interesting to see how Mr. Herman links together western philosophies in all its disparate parts and ties them all back to Plato and Aristotle. And no doubt, as with any book of this kind, disagreement may be had with the arguments Mr. Herman uses to buttress his case. But even so, this is an impressive, interesting and even a delightful read. Although Mr. Herman does not seek to plow new ground, he does make the case that Western philosophy still matters. He argues that, "...

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